Brick and Big Daddy Walk Into A Bar…

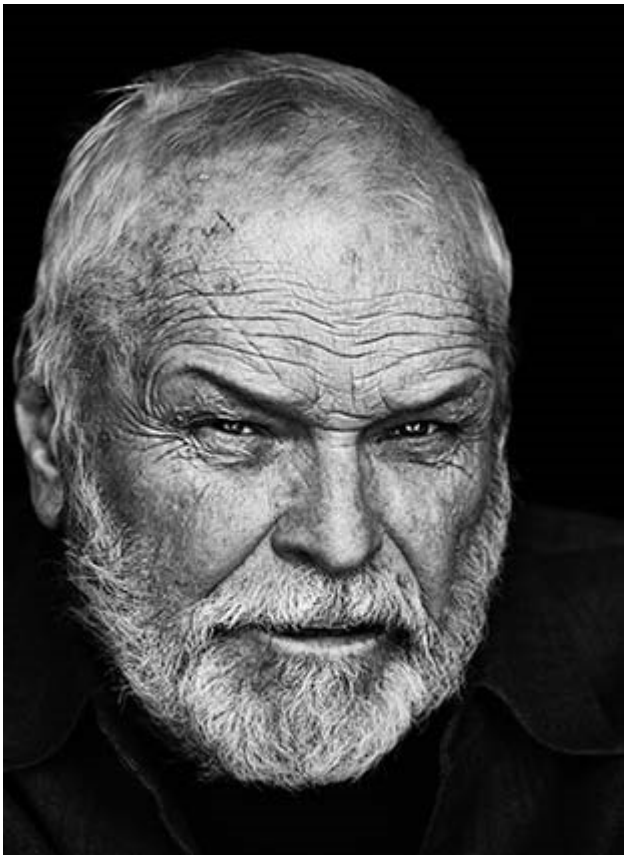

Photo: Mike Piscitelli

by Steve Desroches

Over the course of Brian Dennehy's long career he's played both Brick and Big Daddy in productions of the Tennessee Williams classic *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.* The play, which won the 1955 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, is set on a plantation in the Mississippi Delta, where a family gathers to celebrate the birthday of Big Daddy, who thinks he has a clean bill of health, but is actually dying of cancer, a fact everyone else knows and initially uses to their advantage, particularly Maggie the Cat. Throughout the story *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* explores the themes of greed and superficiality, repression and sexual secrets, impending death, and the lies people tell. That's some heavy stuff, but as Dennehy sees it, with the gravitas acknowledged, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is hilarious.

“What people don’t realize is that *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* is a comedy,” says Dennehy. “Sure there are tragic parts, but it’s a comedy. Maggie the Cat is one of the great comedic roles. There’s nothing more tragic than seeing that play done as a tragedy. It’s f**king wrong.”

With a booming voice and a gritty, affable charm, Dennehy speaks with gusto about theater, acting, and the intersection of the two with humanity and life in general. So his theory that *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* might have more in common with the Del Shores comedy *Daddy’s Dyin’….Who’s Got the Will* than say theories that the play is infused with the inspired nihilism of Dylan Thomas makes for great conversation and mind-opening debate. In short, listening to Dennehy talk about theater is akin to a great night at the theater. So it’s appropriate that he’ll be the feature of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival Annual Dinner, a fundraiser for one of the most dynamic and increasingly influential theater events in New England.

Dennehy’s appearance in Provincetown is doubly auspicious as this year’s festival, scheduled for the last weekend in September, will feature the work of both Williams and Eugene O’Neill, who also spent a considerable amount of time with great artistic accomplishment on the Cape tip. Dennehy’s long list of O’Neill credits has earned him the reputation as one of the greatest interpreters of O’Neill’s work and also won him a Tony Award in 2003 for his landmark performance in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night,* also starring Vanessa Redgrave and the late Philip Seymour Hoffman. And at the annual gala Dennehy will be in conversation with Robert M. Dowling, an O’Neill scholar and author of *Eugene O’Neill: A Life in Four Acts.* It should be a night to remember, as with the mere mention of O’Neill’s work Dennehy’s voice changes; it sharpens and deepens, and then begins to crackle with a renewed energy.

“He encompassed the whole f**king universe,” says Dennehy of O’Neill’s work. “It’s the genius of O’Neill, or that of any artist, to be able to do that.”

Dennehy never got to meet O’Neill, who died in 1953 when Dennehy was only 15, but he did meet Williams once. It was in Chicago, many years ago, maybe 35 or 40. Dennehy remembered that Williams, who was “sh**-faced drunk,” called him over after recognizing him. If memory serves him correctly, Williams was in town for a production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.* The two carried on and Dennehy recalls Williams’ wild sense of humor and corresponding manner. He was every bit the role of Tennessee that night.

Having played two major male roles written by Williams, who is often studied and discussed for his female characters, (in particular Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Amanda from *The Glass Menagerie),* Dennehy has a unique perspective on gender in Williams’ work. Once again the boom of conviction and passion reclaims his voice and Dennehy speaks with bravado about the depth of the women of Williams, his brilliant writing, and how the playwright wrote so ferociously and, for the times, fearlessly. And Dennehy is equally fearless about his opinions of these two great female roles of the stage, arguing one isn’t really, at least in essence, a woman at all, which again sets off a declaration in his voice that also promises he’ll do the same when he takes to the stage at Town Hall this weekend.

“Blanche is really a gay man who has turned himself into a hustler,” says Dennehy. “He was writing that from a stand point of his own experiences through her. Now Amanda, that’s a woman.”

The Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival’s annual dinner, featuring Brian Dennehy, is Saturday, June 4 at Provincetown Town Hall, 260 Commercial St., with cocktails at 6:30 p.m. and dinner and gala at 7:15 p.m. Tickets range from $100 for just the cocktail hour, $175 for dinner, and $500 for a seat at the head table. $1,250 buys a whole table. For tickets and more information call 866.789.TENN ext. 1 or visit twptown.org.

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